

Grace – Kent Dunnington

Luke 15: 11-32

There are some words that I could use in a sentence if I had to, but I never do because I'm not quite sure I grasp them. For example, you won't likely hear me use the words "deconstruction," or "dialectical," or "postmodern" in a sentence; when I use those words, I'm not very sure I know what I'm talking about. We all probably have words like that; we know their grammar, but we really don't "get" them.

I have to admit that there are some Christian words that are like that for me, too. Grace is one of those words. I know how to use it in a sentence—if you grew up going to church as much as I did you learn to fit that word into just about every sentence imaginable—but I'm never really very sure I know what I'm talking about. A lot of the ways we speak about grace are confusing. We say, "There but for the grace of God go I," which seems to imply that the other person went there because he didn't have the grace of God. We Wesleyans like to talk about "prevenient" grace, which makes grace sound like the sort of thing that you can get before you're ready to use it, like stocking up on soup when it's on sale at IGA. We make distinctions between "common grace" and "special grace," which might be taken to suggest that grace is some product that comes in either generic or name brand. Sometimes we even ask for an extra portion of God's grace, which makes it sound like grace is some sort of cosmic goo that God slings around and we'd like him to throw more our way.

The parable from our gospel reading for today—known as the parable of the prodigal son—is a parable about grace, and I think that it says about everything we need to say about grace. When I dwell on this parable, I start to feel like I actually know a little better what I'm saying when I say the word "grace." It offers such a clear portrayal of grace that several of the church fathers called this parable the gospel in miniature.

The parable shows us the distinctive character of God's love—which is all that the word "grace" is about. To speak of grace is always to speak about God's love, and it is a way of saying how counterintuitive, unexpected, strange, and even offensive that love is. This parable shows us that the love of God for us is different than other loves, in two ways. First, we can't do anything to stop God from loving us. And second, we can't do anything to get God to love us. The prodigal son learns the first lesson about grace, and the elder son learns the second. Let me just say a few words about each.

The younger son said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." Despite the culturally scandalous and insulting nature of the younger son's request, the father complies with his wish. Within days, the younger son had liquidated all of his inherited assets and set off from his father's house with a sack of cash and dreams of the good life.

The text tells us that the younger son set out for “a far country.” Those who heard this parable probably understood this to mean a Gentile land, and this is supported when in the next verse we learn that the younger son is quickly reduced to tending swine, an occupation that could have only seemed disgusting to faithful Jews. But the real point of the younger son heading off to the far country is that the far country places him at the greatest distance from the father. He wants space, he wants independence, he wants freedom. The text gives us no reason to suppose that the father has been harsh with him; on the contrary, it gives us every reason to believe that the father has been generous, kind, just, and patient. The problem, from the younger son’s perspective, is not that the father is mean or unfair, only that the father is still the father and therefore the son is still dependent on the father. So long as he is with the father, he has the father’s bounty only along with the father’s boundaries. He wishes to retain the father’s bounty but escape the father’s boundaries. He fears that so long as he is near to the father, he will not taste life to the full. He fears that he will miss out on something.

It is not hard for us to see ourselves in this picture. Sin is always rooted in this fear that our dependence upon some standard of authority external to our own selves is in fact leading away from true fulfillment and happiness. Sin is always an attempt to pursue the bountiful life independent of the source of that bounty. This is why, despite the fact that I am a philosophy teacher, I am always somewhat skeptical whenever students or friends of mine claim to have lost their faith for intellectual reasons. Rarely if ever is this the case. As Bernanos puts it in *The Diary of a Country Priest*, “Faith is not a thing which one ‘loses,’ we merely cease to shape our lives by it.” Intellectual doubts act as justifications for our movement into the far country, a movement which is always more fundamentally rooted in a primal rebellion, a quest for independence, and a fear that we are missing out on life, that we are being cheated out of genuine happiness.

We know what happens next. Within a very short time, the younger son who set out to be free has become a slave. That, too, is the inevitable arc of rebellion. The text tells us that finally the young son “came to himself.” This is a loaded phrase; it means repentance. The young son comes to himself, tells himself the truth about who he is, acknowledges again that his freedom is found only in his relationship with the father, and in response to this acknowledgement, turns his face resolutely homeward. He wonders if he might return to his father’s house, and he rehearses in his own mind how this conversation will go. He will admit his fault, acknowledge his unworthiness, and then beg to be a mere servant in his father’s house. So he sets off again to journey home.

“While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” Immediately, the boy commenced with his confession, but before he could even finish, the father cut him off. The boy had come home! Nothing else mattered to this father! It was time for a party! “And they began to celebrate.”

This is the first thing to say about grace. There is nothing you can do to stop God from loving you. Even if you have betrayed God a thousand times, he will welcome you back with a party.

The father who lets his son depart into a far country nevertheless does not for a moment let go of his relationship to the son. The searching eyes of the father who awaits the return of the son tell us that the father's heart was all along with the son in the far country. This is the wonderful truth about the Father's grace that we learn from the younger son: nothing can separate us from the love of God.

What do we learn about grace from the elder son? We learn the inverse of what we learn from the younger son. From the younger son we learn that we can't stop God from loving us. From the elder son we learn that we can't make God love us.

The elder son, returning from the fields, hears raucous party music. One of the servants informs the elder son that his brother has come home and that a party is being thrown for him. "Then he became angry and refused to go in." When the father learns of his elder son's anger, he leaves the party to come speak with him. He pleads with his son to join in the celebration. Notice how the elder son replies. "Listen!" he begins. He will not address his father as "father." "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back"—notice that he will not address his brother as "brother"—"this son of yours, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

Can we also see ourselves in this elder son? I suspect that for many of us good Christian folks, it is precisely the elder son who makes us most uncomfortable. We have been good, dependable, middle class Christians. We have gone to church faithfully, done our devotionals daily, tithed weekly, kept a clean house, budgeted well, and just generally shown that we are disciplined, under control, and on the way toward sanctification. How terribly uncomfortable we are made, then, when we are confronted with the truth that God's love for us is in no way conditioned by these achievements, that God's love is the one absolutely unconditional love.

Unconditional love gets a lot of good press, but I think that few of us actually want it. For it is in fact humanly impossible to accept and go on accepting a love that does not depend in any way on our own attractiveness. For if your love for me is in no way conditioned by what is good within me, then your love for me is not so much a testament to my intrinsic worth as it is to your generosity. Any worth that I have is only bestowed upon me by your act of love; it is nothing that I possess; it is derivative. And this is a truth that is hard to bear.

Perhaps those that have been reduced to shadows of their former selves by intense physical or emotional suffering know best of what I speak. Suppose that shortly after you are married you are struck down by a chronic disease that will kill you slowly over several years. You become useless, impotent, physically hideous, a financial liability, intellectually impaired, prone to terrible temper tantrums, and requiring constant supervision and aid. And suppose that your spouse's care for you is tender, uncomplaining, and inexhaustible. To receive this care without resentment is beyond the normal human capacity. In this case, as C.S. Lewis points out (*The Four Loves*), "to receive is harder and perhaps more blessed than to give."

This revulsion at unconditional love is at the heart of the elder brother's anger and resentment. He is not merely angry that his younger brother is receiving such extravagant and undeserved treatment. At a much deeper level, he is reckoning with what this celebration implies about his own identity and sense of worth. For if the father's regard for and delight in the younger son cannot be destroyed by the younger son's immoral acts, then the father's love for his sons does not rest on moral performance at all. Which means that the father's love for him—the elder son—can no longer be transposed into an affirmation of his usefulness, his loyalty, his discipline, his beauty. And this recognition comes, as ever does the recognition of grace, with a shock that leaves the elder son reeling. This is the offense of grace; it is for us, but it is not about us. It is the sort of love we need, the sort of love that redeems us and saves us from ourselves, but for that very reason, it is not the sort of love we want.

So this is what grace is like. No matter how bad you are, you can't repel grace. And no matter how good you are, you can't compel grace. The word grace just means that there really is a love like this—a love that is not conditioned by your worth but is indeed the source of the only worth that matters.

And today, again, that Love is throwing a party. We call it Eucharist. If you are returning home from a far country, this party is for you. God has been waiting for you. And if you are returning from a week of labor in your Father's fields, this party is for you, too. "Let us eat and celebrate." Amen.